

OPI Pulse: House Bill 7197/Senate Bill 1620 Digital Learning

Background:

Florida defines virtual instruction as an interactive learning environment created through technology where students are separated from their teachers by time, space, or both. Virtual instruction is also referred to as online or digital learning. The purpose of virtual programs is to make instruction flexible by using online and distance learning technology in nontraditional classroom environments.

Virtual learning in Florida was sparked by the establishment of The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) during the 1996-97 school year. The program started as a grant-funded pilot project which combined two existing but independent virtual programs that were serving Alachua and Orange counties. The pilot program served students in grades 9 through 12. In 2000, the Legislature removed the program's pilot status and statutorily recognized The Florida Virtual School. By 2003, FLVS was a statewide full-time virtual instruction program for students in grades 6 through 12 funded by state dollars. The state also explored additional virtual schooling options during this timeframe.

In 2008, the Legislature established a standard that all school districts must provide virtual instruction options to students in kindergarten through grade 12 beginning with the 2009-10 academic year. Today, virtual instruction offerings across school districts and across the state vary greatly. Both full-time and part-time programs serve various grade levels and student populations. Drop-out prevention and academic intervention virtual programs, such as remediation courses, are also operational in addition to specialized virtual programs such as those offered by the Department of Juvenile Justice. Virtual instruction programs around the state cover a variety of course options including core-curricula courses and advanced course offerings allowing students to earn credit toward higher education.

Issue at a Glance:

House Bill 7197 was originally proposed by the House K-20 Innovation Subcommittee. Members of the Florida House passed the bill on May 2, 2011, with a vote of 98-19. The bill then passed the Senate on May 4, 2011, with a vote of 27-12. The bill proposes several changes related to expanding digital learning options for Florida's students. Proponents of the bill have expressed the following reasons for the legislation:

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Quick Look:

This document includes:

Background Information, Quick Facts, Reference websites and Frequently Asked Questions about [CS/CS/HB 7197](#) introduced by the [K-20 Innovation Subcommittee](#) chaired by [Representative Stargel](#).

Quick Facts:

1996-1997: First year of Florida Virtual School

2,643,396: Number of Florida public school students*

154,125: Number of Florida students enrolled in State Virtual Education**

**According to Florida Department of Education 2010-11 enrollment information*

***According to Florida Department of Education 2008-09 enrollment information*

Terms to Understand:

Florida Virtual School (FLVS): founded in 1997, FLVS serves students in kindergarten through grade 12 utilizing a variety of methods including Internet-based instruction.

District Virtual Instruction Program (VIP): takes place in an interactive learning environment created through technology in which the student and teacher are separated from each other by time, space, or both.

- Proponents believe, in order to adequately prepare students for a career or their continued education, exposure to advancing technology, such as virtual education, is a necessity.
- Proponents believe students who experience both virtual and traditional learning environments will be more well-rounded and successful learners as a result.
- Proponents assert increasing digital learning options will provide parents with the ability to select the best educational environment to meet the needs of their child.

What this Bill Does:

House Bill 7197 proposes several measures to expand digital learning options as well as create assessment and evaluation requirements for virtual programs. The bill also revises the funding mechanism for digital learning. The bill includes language:

- Authorizing virtual charter schools to provide full-time online instruction to eligible kindergarten through grade 12 students in the district in which the student resides;
- Authorizing students to take an online course offered by a school district other than their district of residence, provided that the total student reported (as measured by Full Time Equivalent calculations) by both school districts does not exceed one;
- Requiring high school students entering grade 9 in the 2011-12 school year to complete at least one online course within the 24 credit requirement for high school graduation;
- Authorizing charter schools to offer blended learning courses to full-time students of the charter school. The online instruction must be provided from the physical location of the charter school;
- Authorizing The Florida Virtual School to provide full-time instruction to students in kindergarten through grade 12, and part-time instruction to students in grades 4 and 5 (note: part-time courses for students in grades 4 and 5 are limited to public school students taking grade 6, 7 or 8 coursework for acceleration purposes);
- Expanding the options available for school district virtual instruction programs, including:
 - Requiring school districts to provide opportunities and provider options for virtual instruction;
 - Authorizing full-time kindergarten through grade 12, part-time grades 9 through 12 and full- or part-time instruction

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Virtual Learning & Higher Education:

172,000: Number of State University System of Florida students enrolled in at least one technology based course***

291,990: Number of Florida College System students enrolled in at least one technology based course****

5.6 million: Number of college students enrolled in at least one online course nationwide*****

***According to 2009-2010 data from the State University System of Florida

****According to the Florida Department of Education

*****According to the 2010 Sloan Survey of Online Learning

- for dropout prevention, academic intervention, and Department of Juvenile Justice courses;
- Authorizing school districts to operate and/or create their own virtual instruction programs; and
- Modifying the eligibility criteria for participation in virtual instruction programs to allow eligibility for kindergarten and grade 1 students without the requirement for prior year enrollment in the public school system;
- Requiring charter school governing boards to appoint a representative to resolve disputes and conduct two public meetings in the district at which the principal or director and representative must be present;
- Requiring public school students receiving full-time and part-time instruction from FLVS to take statewide assessments and requiring FLVS to receive a school grade for students receiving full-time instruction;
- Requiring all statewide end-of-course assessments be administered online by the 2014-2015 school year;
- Establishing that funding for all virtual instruction options (FLVS, district operated virtual instruction programs and virtual charter schools) shall be through the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) as provided in the General Appropriations Act, but cannot include funding for class size requirements;
- Requiring the Department of Education to develop an evaluation method for providers of part-time virtual programs; and
- Requiring the Department of Education to issue a report identifying and explaining the best methods and strategies for increasing student access to digital learning.

House Bill 7197 Frequently Asked Questions

Why is it necessary for virtual charter schools to contract with the Florida Virtual School, an approved provider, or enter into an agreement with the school district in order for a charter school's students to participate in the district's VIP?

Proponents assert the purpose of this contract is to ensure that the virtual charter school is using a quality provider.

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For Your Reference:

[Florida Department of Education](#)

[House K-20 Education Innovation Subcommittee](#)

[House Education Committee](#)

[Florida House of Representatives](#)

What is a “blended learning” course?

Blended learning is a teaching method that combines classic learning instruction with an online learning structure.

Why is it necessary for students receiving Florida Virtual School instruction to take statewide assessments including the FCAT?

All Florida public school students are expected to take and pass statewide assessments. Virtual instruction is offered through public schooling options, therefore students enrolled in virtual education are required to take the FCAT.

Why are school districts allowed to create their own virtual instruction programs?

Proponents assert this allows individual school districts to be innovative by offering specific courses that are not offered by other providers.

Why is it necessary for high school students to complete at least one online course?

Proponents assert, requiring all high school students entering grade 9 in the 2011-12 school year to complete at least one online course will guarantee these students gain experience with online/digital learning options, varying their learning experiences and exposing them to a learning environment employed by many institutions of higher learning.

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